Pollution and Purity along the Ganga River

Fiona Marten

The Ganga River occupies several roles which exist in tension: scientists have identified it as one of the most polluted rivers in the world, while simultaneously religious practitioners who live alongside the river in Varanasi consider the Ganga an important site of purification. These two views of the river, as pure and as polluted, have been expressed in ways which reveal the connections and tensions between judgments of environmental pollution and sacred purity. This paper will contrast how religious practitioners in Varanasi and the Indian state rely on the categories of pollution and purity to make claims about the proper relationships and responsibilities between humans and the river. Pandas, ritual specialists who guide pilgrims through purifying rites using Ganga water, describe judgments of purity and pollution as inherently related and hold the Ganga up as an exemplar of purity. In contrast, the Indian state has recently embarked on a series of policies designed to remove pollution from the river while claiming that material pollution and spiritual purity are unrelated concerns. Conflict between the groups has emerged as the state has identified certain religious practices as a source of environmental pollution and religious practitioners have vehemently opposed labelling the river as polluted. Understanding the expressions and sources of this disagreement requires critically engaging with the divergent ontologies expressed by religious residents of Varanasi and the Indian state, and with how each group comes to create and use different categories of pollution and purity in making political claims about the river.

In order to analyze this conflict, this paper relies on two strands of theory: ontological critiques of the nature/culture divide and theories of the connections between the supposedly separate realms of the religious and the secular as expressed through judgments of purity. By

combining these two strands of theoretical work, it becomes clear that the categories used by the Indian state and religious practitioners in Varanasi emerge from competing ontologies. These ontologies, while seemingly irreconcilable, each stem from specific social contexts and political interests. In other words, when people form and express their beliefs publically, they do so with, sometimes explicit, references to the political implications of those beliefs. In the case of Varanasi, religious practitioners' expressions of claims about the pollution of the river have been deployed in order to make not just ontological claims but political claims.

Ontological Dualism and its Detractors

Western ontological dualism, the idea that the mental and the physical exist in two separate planes of existence, has attracted plenty of criticism from ethnographers who recognize that their ethnographic subjects often do not hold such views of the world. Tim Ingold's theoretical work drawing on his ethnography with the Cree is one example of an attempt to first contextualize, and then deconstruct ontological dualism in order to break down the categories of nature and culture. While his project focuses specifically on the nature/culture divide, he writes that:

> Many anthropologists are well aware that the basic contrast between physical substance and conceptual form, of which the dichotomy between nature and culture is one expression, is deeply embedded within the tradition of Western thought. (Ingold 2008, 41)

Ingold's work is helpful for thinking through both the implications of ontological dualism and the difficulties associated with challenging this dualism. Figure 1 shows some of the binary oppositions which emerge from or exist comfortably alongside Western ontological dualism, revealing that a criticism of ontological dualism can be fruitfully applied to breaking down not just the nature/culture divide but also a wide range of other divisions which stem from the same bifurcation of physical and mental.

Nature	Culture
Object	Subject
Secular/Political	Religious
Unpolluted/Clean	Pure
Body	Mind

Figure 1. The binary oppositions that emerge from Western ontological dualism.

However, it is a relatively unexplored topic in anthropological literature how these criticisms of ontological dualism relate to the distinction, or lack thereof, between judgments of religious purity and secular cleanliness. This is not to claim that purity and pollution are not central in anthropological writing, a point to which we will turn next, but that the connection between their opposition has not been fully explored in relation to work on the opposition between nature and culture.

Purity and Pollution in Anthropological Theory

Understanding the differences between the religious and the non-religious or secular aspects of life has been an important project for both social theorists looking to analyze religious traditions from around the world and liberal political theorists looking to justify the separation of church and state. Both Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade's work in the history of religions sought to explain a variety of social outcomes as stemming from different modes of interpreting the difference between the sacred and the profane. For Durkheim (1995 [1912]) in particular, learning how the "primitives" and the "moderns" differed in their categorization of sacred and profane was central to understanding the foundation of human society in general.

Simultaneous with the rise of this sociological theory hinging on the separation of transcendent, sacred concerns from physical, profane ones was the continued dominance of liberalism, a political philosophy hinging on the separation of church and state. As Michael Walzer points out (1984, 315), "[in their] confront[ation with] the world, liberal theorists

preached and practiced an art of separation. They drew lines, marked off different realms, and created the sociopolitical map with which we are still familiar. The most famous line is the 'wall' between church and state, but there are many others". Writing in a context in which the distinction between the religious and the secular had come to hold ethical weight, as liberals posited that a society which separates the sacred from the profane leads to individual freedom, theorists such as Durkheim (1995 [1912], 474-479) held the view that society would eventually recognize that purity (a sacred concern) and pollution (a profane one) were unrelated as scientific thought advanced.

However, since then anthropologists rethought the connection between pollution and purity proposing that the two are fundamentally and inextricably intertwined judgments. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* provides a structuralist account of how the very same conceptual structures are invoked in making judgments about either sacred purity or the material cleanliness of objects. She writes critically of previous theoretical approaches, which had dismissed the connection between the two, stating that:

> A criterion was produced for classing religions as advanced or as primitive. If primitive, then rules of holiness and rules of uncleanness were undistinguishable; if advanced then rules of uncleanness disappeared from religion. They were relegated to the kitchen and bathroom and to municipal sanitation, nothing to do with religion. [Douglas 1966,12]

In contrast to a reliance on this criterion, her approach starts by noting that all our supposedly distinct social spheres are guided and shaped by the same underlying conceptual structures. In the case of judgments about both purity and material cleanliness, Douglas claims that what underlies our judgments is a defense of structure itself. She writes:

> As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder…. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not

> a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. [Douglas 1966, 2]

For Douglas, concerns about the cleanliness of ourselves and the environment are foundational in our efforts to order our lives. Her work re-connecting the categories of purity and pollution, while reaching near-canonical status, has not been the last word on the subject. Writers such as Mary Searle-Chaterjee (2012, 504), have instead claimed that "pollution is a liminal, egalitarian intrusion of other-worldly threat to the conventional social order and is hot with power", identifying pollution not just as the unfolding of our innate desire for order but a process which is thoroughly imbued with and reflective of power relations. Although this paper draws on Douglas's view of the inextricability of judgments of purity and pollution, it will also try to remain attentive to how attempts to label things as polluted are power-laden actions.

Purity and Pollution in Varanasi

Equipped with an understanding of how ontological dualism creates a separation between the sacred and profane and a recognition of the connections between judgments of purity and pollution, we can now turn to the case of the Ganga River. Understanding the debates surrounding the river first requires a basic grasp of how notions of purity are constructed within various strands of Hindu theology. While purity is certainly not the single, central organizing force in Hinduism that Louis Dumont (1966) claimed it was, the purity of objects and beings plays a crucial role in Hindu rituals and encounters with the divine. C.J. Fuller claimed instead, drawing upon his research in Southern India, that for his ethnographic subjects spiritual purity is a type of closeness to god, a mode of "expressing the proper relationship between man and god" (Fuller 1979, 474).

A figure central within many Hindu conceptions of purity is the Ganga River. She is simultaneously a mother goddess, *amrit* (the divine nectar of immortality), and an important site

of purifying rituals. For many Hindus, the Ganga "functions as the archetype of sacred waters" and is necessarily pure (Eck 1996, 138). Moreover, it is not just the Ganga which holds a privileged status as a purifying body within many Hindu theologies but also the entire city of Varanasi. Dying in Varanasi leads to the immediate attainment of moksha, or liberation from reincarnation, regardless of past actions or caste status (Eck 1982). The city therefore functions as an equalizer, further revealing that a Dumontian perspective on purity as a force with the sole purpose of recreating hierarchy is inapplicable in our case.

Setting the stage for ongoing debates surrounding pollution in the Ganga is a history of federal policy which has both identified the river as polluted and as within the domain of human agency to clean or restore to some previous state of cleanliness. In 1986, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi enacted the Ganga Action Plan (GAP), the first of many legislative moves made to increase regulation, research and cleanup activities along the river. Although the state has been attempting to clean up the river for over thirty years, scientists still warn that fecal coliform levels in the river can reach up to ten times greater than the level at which water is no longer considered safe for physical contact (Das and Tamminga 2012,1654). Through this series of policy interventions, the Indian state has separated religious citizen's views on the purity of the river from the state's judgments of its pollution. In a speech delivered in Varanasi commemorating the start of GAP, Rajiv Gandhi stated: "Today, here at Varanasi, we are setting out on a vigorous programme of cleaning the Ganga. No one has ever questioned the purity of the Ganga. But it has been observed of late that we have been letting the purifying waters of the Ganga become polluted...We are now going to stop all this" (Gandhi 1986). His speech reveals the view that while the Ganga's sacred purity is beyond questioning by the state, the state has the means and authority to roll back pollution, conceived of as a completely separate issue.

While there is an unfortunate dearth of ethnographic material describing how bureaucrats and hydrologists in Varanasi use the categories of pollution and purity to understand their work, we can still point to the ways in which the Indian state, from PM Gandhi on, conceives of and addresses pollution. Indeed, as Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree Reddy argue (2011, 1635), management of waste and pollution is one of the foremost duties of a state, such as India, tasked with securing the conditions under which capitalism can thrive. The Indian state has taken on the project of identifying and removing pollution: a reflection of both the responsibility of the capitalist state to remove obstacles to the accumulation of value such as waste and pollution, and the responsibility of the secular state to acknowledge religious judgments of purity as a separate concern which does not impinge on secular clean up efforts. In this instance the category of pollution functions in ways both Douglas and Searle-Chatterjee would recognize, deployed both to create order and as an incident hot with power as the state acts upon certain kinds of values while ignoring others.

In contrast, residents of Varanasi have been active in proclaiming their view that it is impossible for the Ganga to become polluted. In her ethnographic work in Varanasi, Kelly Alley relayed from interviews that:

> Residents explained how Ganga co-exists with this gandagi (waste), lovingly carrying it out of sight. Ganga is like a mother, many added, who cleans up the messes her child makes. Many remarked, "The Ganga can never be impure." "Ganga Ma does not observe or accept gandagi." "Although Ganga tries and may not overcome gandagi, she is never cancelled out by it. Gandagi is unpleasant but, thankfully, it floats away. Ganga takes it away. This is the power of Ganga." [Alley 1994, 130]

Alley also conducted ethnographic research with the pandas of Varanasi, or the ritual specialists who work on the banks of the river and guide pilgrims through purifying rituals which often involve bathing in and drinking the river water. Pandas request fees and for many this is their only source of income. When talking to pandas about the practice of snan or the disposal of

partially cremated corpses in the river, Alley points out that "pandas firmly believe that dead bodies do not threaten Ganga's purificatory power. They insist that these bodies and all other forms of gandagi cannot alter the Ganga… [Her] power is eternal and not subject to fluctuations in material reality" (Alley 2002, 97). This view is seemingly restricted to ritual specialists within Varanasi, as Alley also describes how holy men visiting for a festival accepted the difference between spiritual purity and environmental pollution. They talk about "two unrelated subjects: Ganga's transcendent purity and the disintegration of the tangible or material world" (Alley 2002:212). However, for those in Varanasi, claims that the Ganga is polluted run counter to beliefs about the nature of the river and her powers. The perspectives adopted by Varanasi residents and pandas differs significantly from that of the state, as shown in Figure 2.

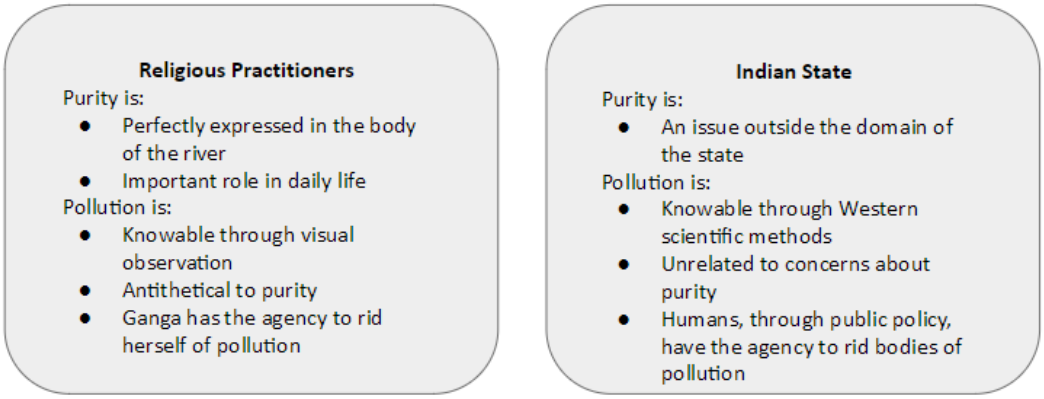

Figure 2. Contrasting the views on purity and pollution of religious practitioners in Varanasi to those of the Indian state.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, significant conflict has erupted between the state and pandas surrounding the issue of what practices in the river are appropriate. The Indian state has identified religious practices which deposit objects into the river, particularly snan, as a source of pollution to be eliminated. One of the first projects funded by GAP was the construction of a new electric crematorium right by Varanasi to "ease the pollution load on the river" caused by snan (Alley 2002, 97). And although GAP promised to be a "participatory project", researchers have

pointed out that "water user groups … who derive an economic livelihood from the Ganga are literally excluded from the definition and process of participation" (Ahmed 1994:3). Finally, a new special police task force was set up in Varanasi to patrol the river banks looking for evidence of pollution, a practice which threatens the pandas' abilities to make money from pilgrims (Das and Tamminga 2012, 1657). These threats from the state to the religious practices and economic livelihoods of the pandas were met with scorn, as Alley points out that "many [religious practitioners] stressed the purity of Ganga… in order to denounce or delimit the credibility of official policies defining and measuring river pollution" (Alley 1994, 129). These conflicts reveal both the political outcomes of divergent judgments about purity and pollution, as well as how the categories and judgments are themselves recreated through political conflict. With such deep tensions between the state and religious practitioners in Varanasi, it is worth returning to the question of whether or not such perspectives are fundamentally irreconcilable.

Bringing Ontological Dualism Back In

When faced with seemingly irreconcilable disagreements about the divide, if any, between nature and culture, anthropologists have offered a variety of creative solutions to the problems posed by ontological disagreements. Elizabeth Povinelli's (1995) article *Do Rocks Listen: The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Indigenous Labor* points to the ways in which the Australian state is fundamentally unable to recognize differences in ontologies. Western science and economics are portrayed as the neutral arbiter of disagreement, and the state struggles to recognize that the foundational ontological dualism framing Western scientific practices is not shared by all Australians. Povinelli concludes by pointing out that if the state were to truly value aboriginal perspectives, it would require a type of critical engagement with the assumption of ontological dualism upon which Australian policy relies. Her analysis is useful

for breaking into the problems of pollution in the Ganga: in both cases a group of people is making claims about the agency of beings (rocks for the Belyuen women, and the Ganga for the pandas in Varanasi) which are viewed solely as objects through the lens of the state. In both cases, the first step toward mutual understanding would have to come from engaging with different ontologies, in the one instance to better understand the ways in which nature in Australia is fundamentally included in Belyuen society and in the other to see that judgments of pollution will always be entwined with beliefs about purity.

So what does engaging with different ontologies look like? One way to do so draws from the work of post-structuralist theorists like Phillipe Descola (2014), who might claim that the very world that the pandas of Varanasi inhabit is different due to their way of ordering the world. As they socialize nature, they come to live in a different nature than the one experienced by Indian bureaucrats. According to this view, the challenges posed by competing ontologies are insurmountable, and the best we can do is recognize the separation between our worlds. However, a more productive path might start with recognizing, in line with Michael Cepek, that "the best way to comprehend the intellectual agency of our collaborators is to acknowledge, rather than ignore, the social, pragmatic, and epistemological contours of their discourse, cosmological or otherwise" (Cepek 2016, 623). In order to form a better understanding of the divergent ontologies of the Indian state and the pandas in Varanasi, we can turn to the social conditions from which these divergent categories arise.

In the case of the pandas, regulations on pollution from the state threaten their economic livelihoods as well as the basis for their daily religious practices. Moreover, as the pandas themselves note, part of their insistence on the purity of the river is in order to undermine the legitimacy of the state (Alley 1994, 129). Sometimes, their own engagement with the river

reveals an acknowledgement that the material conditions of the river make it dangerous. Alley points out how "two of the three dominant pandas in Dasasvamedha rarely bathe [at a site next to a sewage drainage pipe]. They recommend cleaner locations" and one panda admits that after a doctor's warning "I have not bathed in Ganga for three or four years" (Alley 2002, 97-98). Noting this is not an attempt to claim that the pandas are disingenuous when they simultaneously claim that the Ganga is permanently and irrevocable clean and pure, but rather to show that such claims are made publically with specific political aims in mind. By making claims about the purity of the river, pandas are able to simultaneously question the means of knowledge production employed by the state and the practices of policing which are justified through those claims.

However, it is not just the pandas whose beliefs about purity and pollution are shaped by their social context and political interests. The Indian state's selection of policy tools that target pandas to end pollution are also made within a specific socio-political context. After all, even though scientists point out that industrial runoff and inadequate sewage systems are the main causes of pollution in the Ganga, the state has made more of an effort to police the religious practices of Varanasi residents than to crack down on pollution from industry or invest in better public infrastructure (Das and Tamminga 2012, 1634).

Understanding that a difference in ontologies underlies the disagreements over the categories of pollution and purity at play in Varanasi is just the first step in understanding how ontological disagreements play out. The ways in which the categories used by each group are shaped by a certain social context and set of material interests reveals how the judgment of the Ganga as polluted or not is always hot with power, and inevitably intertwined with considerations of purity. Moreover, we can take the beliefs of the pandas seriously while noting,

as they themselves do, that their perspectives have been formed in opposition to state intervention. Through the case of the divergent views on purity and pollution expressed by religious practitioners in Varanasi and the Indian state, it becomes clear how categorical differences between two groups are manifested in and through political conflict.

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